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ABSTRACT

Behavioral differences have often been noted between blacks and whites. These differences seem to be associated with the perception and interpretation of the environment and the subsequent selection of the appropriate adapting strategies. This is a socialized difference which is best explained by the concept of psychological differentiation or cognitive style. The concept refers to the way an individual analyzes and structures his environment based upon his visual perceptions, that is, whether he is field-dependent or field-independent. Although there is disagreement as to whether or not psychological differentiation has any relationship to intelligence, field-independent individuals appear to function better in school situations. Various studies have shown racial differences in psychological differentiation with blacks tending towards field-dependence. However, when social class and sex are entered as variables this assumption becomes questionable. Other areas where perceptual differences have been noted between the races include the emphasis on the oral and aural modes among blacks, social distance or proxemics, and learning and thinking style. Whether these differences exist between classes or not, there is one factor which affects all levels and classes of blacks which may be a significant variable--racism. (RLV)

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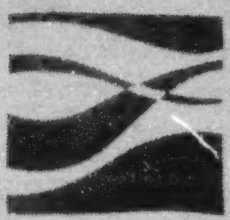

Theoretical Paper No. 76

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Center for Individualized Schooling

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RACIAL PREFERENCES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFERENTIATION: AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION FOR GROUP DIFFERENCES

by

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Report from the Center Royalty Fund Committee

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Abstract

Study after study has indicated some difference in the behavioral responses of Afro- and Euro-Americans. This has been particularly true in areas which are considered vital to successful participation in an "achieving" society. This paper proposes that these differences could be the result of culturally induced variations in the perceptual dimension of personality.

Examination of the research available in the areas of perceptual articulation, social perception, information processing, and environmental perceptions indicates the need to pursue this issue in greater detail. Attention should focus particularly on the influence of perception on Afro-American learning style.

Racial Preferences in Psychological Differentiation:

An Alternative Explanation for Group Differences

When skin color is not a consideration, social scientists are apparently prepared to acknowledge that individuals or groups who are dissimilar in age, social class, environment, sex, or other factors can legitimately differ in their approaches and responses to the world (Barsch, 1971; Dubois, 1960; Hall, 1966; Triandis, 1976). However, when the issue of Afro- and Euro-American differences is introduced, inferiority rather than differences becomes the explanatory base. For some reason it becomes difficult for these same examiners to comprehend that persons of essentially the same environment, the same language, values and attitudes, and perhaps even the same experiences, would vary in the way they perceive, conceptualize and respond to the world around them. The areas in which this difference in behavior has been particularly emphasized have been test performance (Dreger, 1973) and academic achievement (L'Abate, Oslin, & Stone, 1973).

In recent years, the inferiority explanation has been substituted with an adaptational reason based upon the premise that Afro-Americans developed a parallel culture in response to their blocked opportunity for participation in mainstream society. Behavioral scientists of this orientation suggest that the variation in behavior found between Afro- and Euro-Americans is not attributable to genetic factors such as skin color but to the fact that a unicultural group (i.e., Euro-Americans) is actually being compared with a bicultural group (i.e., Afro-Americans) (Rameriz & Price-Williams, 1973; Triandis, 1976; Valentine, 1971). Thus,

differences in behavioral responses should be expected.

When abstracted and analyzed, these behavioral differences seem to be largely associated with the perception and interpretation of the environment and the subsequent selection of the appropriate adapting strategies. From a psychological perspective, this is a socialized difference which seems best explained by the concept of psychological differentiation.

Psychological Differentiation

The concept of psychological differentiation is often referred to as cognitive style. For Witkin and his associates who made it prominent, the concept represents a bipolar continuum denoting the ability of the individual to analyze and structure their environment based upon their visual perceptions (Witkin, Dyke, Paterson, Goodenough, & Karp, 1962). At one end of this continuum are those who concentrate on the specific parts of an environmental field or situation and are considered to be highly articulated or field-independent. At the other end are those who prefer to attend to the whole structure of the field or situation and are thus more global in their approach. These are field-dependent individuals. For each of these preferred modes of approaching, experiencing, and organizing the environment there is a correlated set of personal, cognitive, and behavioral responses (Dreyer, McIntire, & Dreyer, 1973; Witkin, Moore, Goodenough, & Cox, 1977).

Individuals whose preferred mode of approaching the environment can be classified as field-independent are persons who tend to be highly individualistic and independent in their actions. In addition, these

individuals tend to concentrate on the tasks with which they are involved and very often appear to be unaware of social undercurrents. Some descriptions of them suggest that they are cold and socially withdrawn or distant. Other facets of their personalities include being very controlled, being internally motivated, and seemingly highly organized and structured (Witkin, Goodenough, & Karp, 1967; Witkin, Lewis, Hertzman, Machover, Meissner, & Wapner, 1954; Witkin et al., 1977).

Field-dependent individuals, on the other hand, appear to have a highly sensitive people-radar system oriented toward attending to social reactions and nuances. They appear to have a greater need for people and group interactions on both a physical as well as a social level which apparently makes these individuals dependent upon others for definitions of attitudes and feelings. This also makes them more externally controlled and more tolerant of authoritarian situations (Gardner, Jackson, & Messick, 1960; Witkin & Price-Williams, 1974; Witkin et al., 1977).

Although there is disagreement as to whether or not psychological differentiation has any relationship to intelligence (Kagan, 1970; Witkin et al., 1962), field-independent individuals do appear to function better in school situations on school tasks and score better on the various personality and mental abilities tests now in use (Cohen, 1971; Dubois & Cohen, 1970; Witkin et al., 1977). While considerably more research must be done in this area as Wachtel (1972) points out, the possibility of such a relationship poses an interesting explanation for the reasons for the differences in performance in these areas between

Afro- and Euro-Americans. For if, as Witkin and others suggest, the differences in psychological differentiation or cognitive style are generated by differences in training and cultural groups (Rameriz & Price-Williams, 1974; Witkin et al. 1962, 1977), then the differences in academic and intelligence test performance could be the result of different perceptual modes precipitated by the need for Afro-Americans to develop a style which would assist them in perceiving and interpreting situations involving racial oppression and hostility. To pursue this speculation, it is necessary to determine if there are empirically supported racial group differences in psychological differentiation.

Racial Differences in Psychological Differentiation

Most of the research on psychological differentiation has concentrated on individual differences. In the few studies of group differences, most of the research examined that of sex group, social class, age, and finally international variations in cognitive style. There are, however, a few studies of ethnic group differences which examine the question of variations in Afro- and Euro-American modes.

Using the Rod and Frame Test as a measure of psychological differentiation, Barclay and Cusumano (1967) tested 20 Afro- and 20 Euro-American males for field dependency as well as masculine orientation. The results indicated that Afro-American males were significantly more field-dependent than Euro-American males. A similar study using the same test produced similar results (Rameriz & Price-Williams, 1974). However, Gill, Herdtner and Lough (1968) found only minimal differences

in cognitive style of Afro- and Euro-Americans. These authors did note that some variations were found in the perception of space relationships and position in space which could be construed as differences in visual perceptions of the environment.

In studies of the construct using the Embedded Figures Test developed by Witkin and associates primarily to measure field-dependence-independence, differences between the two ethnic groups again emerged. Ritzinger (1971) examined the psychological differentiation ability of Afro- and Euro-American children between the ages of 6 and 11. He found that the relationship of spatial perception and race was highly significant and when compared, Afro-American children were more global or field-dependent in their attention focus than Euro-Americans who tended to be field-independent. Perney (1976) conducted the most focused investigation in the area of racial differences and reported similar findings as did Schratz (1976). This difference between Afro- and Euro-Americans in the latter study, however, applied only to adolescents, not preadolescents.

While the evidence is rather limited, there does appear to be some reason to believe that there are racial differences in psychological differentiation. However, when social class and sex are entered as variables, this assumption becomes questionable. Gamble (1971), for example, found that a white suburban or middle-class sample was more field-independent than an urban black lower-class group but no differences were found when the urban black group was compared to a rural white group with seemingly the same economic means. Gill and associates (1968)

compared races of similar socioeconomic status and reported that middle-class children, regardless of race, performed better on all perceptual differentiation tests than did lower-class children.

Using a lower-class sample of which 90% were Afro-Americans and a middle-class sample of which 100% were Euro-Americans, Karp, Silberman, and Winters (1969) found no social class differences in psychological differentiation and presumably no racial differences. Rameriz and Price-Williams (1974) on the other hand found racial differences but no social class differences. This type of confusion may result from the introduction of different sex groups into the sample.

For the most part, research has tended to indicate that females are more field-dependent while males are field-independent (Witkin et al., 1962). Perney (1976) found this true for females in her sample with Afro-American females being the most field-dependent. Schratz (1976) disagreed with this finding as sex differences analyses found Afro-American males to be more field-dependent. The issue of whether or not there is a difference in the preferred cognitive style between Afro- and Euro-Americans thus becomes further confused.

If perceptions about social situations are introduced as measurements rather than as traditional tests for the differentiation construct, a more definitive picture emerges.

In the study of psychological differentiation, Witkin and his associates (1962, 1977) found that individuals who were field-dependent relied heavily on external cues and developed a highly sensitive people-radar system. In research in which groups were compared on how and to

what extent they attended to facial cues, Afro-Americans were found to attend to very different cues than Euro-Americans and thus developed different recognition patterns. Although both groups seemed to pay closer attention to the faces of people of their own racial group (Chance, Goldstein, & McBride, 1975; Galper, 1973; Luce, 1974), Afro-Americans seemed better at perceiving cues and discerning the correct emotions displayed by faces of individuals regardless of race (Gitter, Black, & Mostofsky, 1972).

Not only do Afro- and Euro-Americans seem to attend to different types of cues in people, they also appear to detect different social reactions and nuances in various social situations. A study of a military situation done by Hill and Fox (1973) found different perceptions about the climate as well as the people when Afro- and Euro-American squad leaders of interracial squads were compared. White squad leaders, for example, reported more of a perceived need to give reprimands to white subordinates and better performance ratings to black subordinates than did the black squad leaders while the black squad leaders reported more perceptions of good relationships between themselves and subordinates than did the white squad leaders. In another study conducted in a different environment, differences in climate perceptions were also noted. A comparison of teachers in a racially integrated school found that Afro-American teachers reported more perceptions of teacher-to-teacher conflict than did Euro-American teachers and also seemed to indicate more of a rapport with non-academic staff and students (Witmer & Ferinden, 1970).

In both situations, the differences in responses seemed to polarize themselves on a continuum. Afro-Americans seemingly responded more to people or interpersonal relationships while Euro-Americans responded more to the task required of those involved in the situations. From a cognitive style perspective, Afro-Americans would thus be considered field-dependent while Euro-Americans would be field-independent.

A difference in social nuance perception is also noted in studies of the affective meanings of words. In the Landis, McGrew, Day, Savage, and Saral (1976) study in which middle-class Afro- and Euro-Americans as well as hard-core unemployed Afro- and Euro-Americans were asked to respond to a word list on a semantic differential scale, it was found that the two racial groups, regardless of class, attached different values, different emotional reactions, and different potency to words. For example, the most positive and highly valued words for Afro-Americans but not Euro-Americans were quality-of-life words such as progress, success, future, and money. Words having the most positive response and highest value for Euro-Americans but not Afro-Americans were words such as marriage, work, and hope. In the personal relationship category, words such as truth, respect, and sympathy were highly valued by Afro-Americans while Euro-Americans preferred words such as love. On the other hand, Euro-Americans responded with more emotion and negativism to words such as battle, danger, trouble, crime, and confrontation while Afro-Americans showed not only less emotion, but actual neutrality toward such words.

In another study of subjective cultural differences, Szaley and

Bryson (1973) found that words representing themes of racial integration, individual needs, and social problems were perceived as having higher value by Afro-Americans while Euro-Americans preferred word domains representing various isms, nation, and health. In view of the difference in roles of the two racial groups in society, these differences in perceptions should be expected. What is important to note, however, is that these differences cause the groups to attend to different cues and produce different interpretations of the environment (Kagan, Roseman, Day, Albert, & Phillips, 1964; Triandis, 1976). This leads to a group difference in the information processing mode or cognitive style.

Variations in psychological differentiation influence not only interpersonal perceptions but environmental perceptions as well. In this area, individuals who are field-independent seem to perceive themselves as more in control of their environment while field-dependent individuals perceive the environmental forces controlling them. Although there is a scarcity of empirical information on the relationship between the cognitive style of Afro-Americans and their perception of environmental control, there are studies of differences between racial groups on the control dimension which might provide some insight.

The statement is often made that Afro-Americans tend to be more externally controlled than Euro-Americans (Coleman, 1966). Research results do not confirm this. In the initial study of differences in perception of environmental control, Battle and Rotter (1963) reported a difference with Afro-Americans being more externally controlled and Euro-Americans more internally controlled. Similar findings were

reported by Pedhauzer and Wheller (1971). In both studies, however, the comparison groups represent not only racial differences but social class differences as well, i.e., the middle class was composed of Euro-Americans and the lower class of Afro-Americans. In studies in which social class was controlled, no racial differences in perception of environmental control were found (Gable & Minton, 1971; Milgram, 1971; Milgram, Shore, Riedel, & Malasky, 1970).

Gurin, Gurin, Lao, and Beattie (1969) suggest that much of the confusion in this area is the result of Afro-Americans having the ability to make situational control differentiations. While adopting the general cultural values of the need for personal control of the environment, they are also able to delineate situations which are in control of others. This ability to distinguish situationally appropriate control proved vitally important for Afro-American academic and social success (Gurin & Epps, 1975). This two-factor differentiation, however, has not been found on a wide basis within Euro-American populations.

Based upon the information presented, the answer to the question of racial differences in psychological differentiation cannot be advanced with any definitive statement. Trends, however, have been noted. For example, results of the measurement instruments of psychological differentiation suggest that there are some differences, particularly in perceptual orientation, thus, Afro-Americans appear to be more field-dependent while Euro-Americans are more likely to be field-independent.

Similar trends are noted in the research of the social perceptual correlates of psychological differentiation. Afro-Americans apparently

attend to different facial cues, different emotional overtones, and receive different sets of information from people or words. This apparent greater people sensitivity suggests that field-dependency is the cognitive style orientation most often in use.

This social sensitivity further manifests itself in environmental situation perceptions with Afro-Americans appearing to function in a fairly articulated manner. Thus they are able to differentiate situations in which they have little control. This high degree of environmental sensitivity could also be defined as field-dependency (Massair & Mansfield, 1973; Rameriz & Price-Williams, 1973).

If, as trends in these various areas indicate, field dependency is the Afro-American preferred mode of perceiving, experiencing, and interpreting environments, and if many situations in America are designed for Euro-American preferred mode of field-independency, some disparate functioning will obviously be found. A good example of this is in the academic and intelligence testing situations.

Cohen (1971) analyzed various personality and intellectual tests as well as the behavior requirements for success in school and found that those students who were field-independent or analytical in their approach were much more likely to succeed than those who were field-dependent or relational. Gamble (1971) and Wilde (1973) reported similar findings. Wilde's study of black children found that those who were successful in school tended to be field-independent as measured by the Embedded Figures Test and also demonstrated the ability to analytically organize and categorize information. Gamble (1971) found that field-

independent Afro-Americans not only adjusted better to school and displayed the necessary behaviors, but also performed better on IQ tests.

In other investigations, Riley and Denmark (1974) and Ritzinger (1971) looked at Afro-Americans in grades one through five and found a relationship between field-independence and performance on IQ tests, with field-independent students securing better scores than field-dependent students. In learning situations, this relationship also held. Busse (1968) examined fifth grade Afro-American males and found that those with a field-independent approach performed better in problem solving tasks while Beishdel (1973), Ferrell (1971), and Schwartz (1972) found that this cognitive style was highly correlated with students' ability to do well on various learning tasks. This same relationship was found in achievement test performance (Chepp, 1975; Schratz, 1976).

It would thus appear that the situations in which most Afro-American students find themselves are those designed for Euro-American cultural approach and only those who adopt the same style are able to cope with these situations. The implications of this possibility are rather staggering and require considerably more study for verification.

Implications for Future Research

Although the primary focus of future research should be to replicate the correlational study of Witkin and associates relative to psychological differentiation of Afro-Americans and to compare these results with

those of Euro-Americans, substantial attention should also be focused on particular dimensions of the concept--particularly the perceptual and cognitive domains.

Because the individual must first gather information from the environment before it can be processed, organized, and then interpreted for action, the perceptual domain should be examined first (Nebelkopf & Dreyer, 1970; Neisser, 1976). In gathering information, individuals use all of their six sensory systems. Barsch (1971), however, suggests that some of these interacting modes may be more effective than others because of experiential emphasis. For example, a parent who is extremely visually oriented will probably stress the use of the visual system over the others just as other families might prefer to stress auditory use. The result is that different people notice or attend to different cues or aspects from the same situation.

The emphasis of the oral and aural mode in Afro-American communities has been often identified (Goldstein, 197.). Whether or not this difference has a substantial effect upon the perceptual style of Afro-Americans in learning situations has not been emphasized. Bruininks (1969) did examine the relationship of the various perceptual modes to the reading ability of young Afro-American males and found that, of the six tests which had a high relationship to reading achievement for this sample, four were auditory. Robbins (1976) asked both Afro- and Euro-American college students to report their perceptions of the best learning mode for themselves. Afro-Americans reported that they believed they learned better via the spoken word while Euro-Americans

indicated that they learned better using all modalities, particularly the visual. This apparent preference for the auditory mode may account for the poor performance of Afro-Americans on visual perception tests (Hansley & Busse, 1969; Leifer, 1972). More important, it may account for the differences in performance on such tests as the WESC Bock Design, WIS. Picture completion, Raven's Progressive Matrices, and Rorschach tests as all of these seem to be highly visually oriented. Certainly, this is a relationship to be examined.

Another area of consideration in the examination of perceptual differences is that of social distance. Social distance or personal space is a descriptive term for the psychological expectations individuals have that persons in their environment will not come more than a certain distance to communicate. If these expected boundaries are violated, some sense of anxiety or discomfort occurs (Liebman, 1970). Although there is lack of agreement on the direction of the differences, Euro- and Afro-Americans have been found to differ in their perceptions of what is a comfortable social space.

In their study of distance in the interaction between dyads of similar racial background, Aiello and Jones (1971) found that Afro-American children between the ages of six and eight preferred to stand closer to each other than did Euro-American children. A replication of their study produced similar results for first grade children but not for older children in the fifth grade (Jones & Aiello, 1973). In another study of this dimension using university students, Bauer (1973) also found that Afro-Americans tended to interact at a closer distance than

Euro-Americans.

Baxter (1970), Tennis and Dabbs (1976), Willis (1966), and Zimmerman and Brody (1975) reported that the opposite was true. In each of their studies, Euro-Americans were found to interact with each other at a closer distance than Afro-Americans. These studies, however, were those with primarily adult samples which suggest that perhaps some change occurred with age. Inasmuch as this social distance sensitivity is considered to be a learned reaction (Liebman, 1970), the interjection of the development of a lack of trust of all people as found by Switkin and Gynther (1974) and Wubberhort, Gradford, and Willis (1971) may force Afro-Americans to change their interpersonal perceptions and move farther apart. This subsequent need to create a greater distance between people with whom they are interacting may also account for the fact that Afro-Americans, regardless of age, have been found to face each other less directly than whites (Aiello & Jones, 1971; Jones, 1971; Jones & Aiello, 1973; Zimmerman & Brody, 1975).

The issue of differences in social distance requirements addresses one of the basic tenets of the field-dependence-independence construct--i.e., the mode of perception of space (Irving, 1970). Thousands of cues are transmitted in every situation and each individual chooses those cues from the environment for interpretation which fits their particular perceptual pattern (Kagan, Roseman, Day, Albert, & Phillips, 1964; Stagner, 1974; Triandis, 1976; Witkin, 1954). However, the quality and intensity of the cues and the subsequent perceptual pattern is changed by the distance between the transmitter and receiver (Bauer, 1973;

Hall, 1966). If the culture of Afro-Americans conditions them to use different sensory distances and subsequently different sensory modes, this would certainly have an important effect upon the information-processing style and subsequent cognitive responses (Bauer, 1973; Gyr & Willey, 1971; Hall, 1966; Neisser, 1976). This becomes an important area for future investigation.

The other domain within the psychological differentiation concept which needs much attention is most often referred to as learning, thinking, or conceptualizing style. Kagan and associates (1964, 1970) suggest that this dimension should be studied from the aspect of whether or not an individual is analytical in their approach or relational while Harvey, Hunt, and Schroeder (1961) suggest that individuals develop a preference for concrete or abstract material. Although Jensen (1969, 1973) prefers to have his learning styles placed on a hierarchy rather than a continuum as did the other theorists, he indicates that individuals develop a particular style of learning based upon memory. His labels are associative as opposed to conceptual and seem to have similar definitions as Hunt's et al. (1960) concrete and abstract dimensions.

Other authors focus on methods of responding to the learning situation and often suggest that there are preferred modes in this. Kagan et al. (1970) suggest that some people are rather anxious to insure that they gather all the information possible before being asked to respond and they have a need to be accurate. These individuals are considered to be reflective while those individuals who respond immediately to what is presented without regard to the fact they may be

erroneous are labeled as impulsive learners. Santostefano (1970) and other theorists referred to these response styles as levelers and sharpeners with levelers being similar to impulsive learners while sharpeners were those who were more reflective learners.

A learning style profile of Afro-Americans using these various dimensions has not been developed. Jensen (1969) did advance one theory in which he proposed that Afro-Americans tended to prefer associate learning rather than conceptual learning. Like other studies of differences, social class variables seemed to confound this study as Afro-Americans were of the lower class and Euro-Americans of the middle class. Talkin's (1968) work suggests some difficulty with this type of comparison.

In another study by Zucker and Stricker (1968), Afro- and Euro-American were compared in their response to learning situations. These authors reported that Afro-Americans tended to be impulsive in their approach while Euro-Americans were reflective but again, middle-class whites were compared to lower-class blacks. When race was controlled in the study of this dimension, Mumbauer and Miller (1970) found only class differences and in the study in which class was controlled, Reiss (1972) found no difference between the races on the reflective-impulsive dimension. In view of these rather limited and inconclusive findings, more research to determine a preferred learning style is needed and if found, efforts should be made to determine if the perceptual mode preference influences the style (Gyr & Willey, 1971).

In spite of similarity of skin color, Afro-Americans are a

heterogenous group, and the determination of a preferred group style of psychological differentiation will probably be difficult. However, there is one factor which affects all levels and classes of Afro-Americans which may be a significant intervening variable--i.e., racism. Silverstein and Krate (1975) in their study of Afro-American children and families proposed that:

> . . . It may be that black adults generally develop a greater ability to tolerate seemingly contradictory emotions than white Americans do. While this ability may develop, in part, reactively as a defense against blocked opportunity and racial oppression, it has been argued that it may also reflect an intrinsic cultural element in black communities, a heritage of the feeling-oriented as opposed to the concept oriented. . . pg. 33.

If these authors are correct, there is probably a difference in psychological differentiation with Afro-Americans being more field-dependent because of their need to be more sensitive to the social environment. Since Witkin indicates this is a socialized trait, then Afro-American children may very well be taught a form of adaptation which as Cohen (1971) indicates, is not conducive to certain situations, particularly school and testing. Fortunately, it is an approach which can be changed.

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11/79